

# WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HYPERTENSION

In the Clinic  
Annals of Internal Medicine

## What is hypertension?

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is a common health problem. Blood pressure measures the force of blood pushing against the walls of your arteries as your heart pumps blood through your body. High blood pressure strains your blood vessels and your heart. Your heart has to work harder with every heartbeat. If you don't get treated for your hypertension, there is a higher risk for heart attack, heart failure, stroke, or kidney failure.

## What are the warning signs?

Hypertension often has no symptoms. Some people can tell when their blood pressure may be high, but the only way to know for sure is to have it measured. For most people, there is no one cause. Your family history, diet, weight, and other lifestyle habits can affect your blood pressure. Certain medical problems, such as kidney or thyroid disease, may cause blood pressure to rise. Also, certain medicines, like those for arthritis or colds, can raise blood pressure. Some women develop a special type of high blood pressure during pregnancy. This usually goes away after the baby is born, but sometimes it can linger.

## How is it diagnosed?

Blood pressure is measured by placing a cuff around the arm and inflating the cuff, which is connected to a device that measures pressure. The test is easy and painless. Your doctor may want to take several readings at different times before diagnosing you with hypertension. This is because blood pressure normally changes during the day. The reading is given as two numbers (example: 120/80). The top number is called systolic pressure, and it measures the pressure while your heart is beating. The bottom number is called diastolic pressure, and measures the pressure while the heart is relaxed between beats. Normal blood pressure is any pressure equal to or less than 120/80.



## How is it treated?

There are many different medicines to help treat high blood pressure. Your doctor may prescribe one medicine or a combination of medicines. Many lifestyle changes can also help to lower your blood pressure. Almost everyone with high blood pressure can bring down their numbers with lifestyle changes, medicines, or both. Follow these healthy habits even if you take blood pressure medicine:

- Eat less salt
- Exercise
- Eat more fruits and vegetables
- Lose weight
- Drink less alcohol
- Quit smoking

## For More Information

[www.acponline.org/patients\\_families/pdfs/health/hypertension\\_report.pdf](http://www.acponline.org/patients_families/pdfs/health/hypertension_report.pdf)

American College of Physicians: ACP Special Report: Living with Hypertension

[www.acponline.org/patients\\_families/pdfs/health/hypertension\\_report.pdf](http://www.acponline.org/patients_families/pdfs/health/hypertension_report.pdf)

American Heart Association: High Blood Pressure

[www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=2114](http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=2114)  
National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute: Your Guide to Lowering Blood Pressure



**American College of Physicians**  
Leading Internal Medicine, Improving Lives